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ABSTRACT

Offered are 20 tips that caregivers can use to help young children discover the pleasures and powers of language. Tips include: tie words to actions; use language that matches the child's stage of development; use specific encouragement; help children think in sequences; teach time and space words, as well as polar opposites and relational terms; use open-ended questions; activate children's listening skills; keep talk and attitudes toward language positive, and use humor; describe and label; help children see the relationship between written and oral language; help children create stories; engage children in dramatic play games; discuss feelings with children; help children reason and use cause and effect words; use incongruity and make obvious mistakes to encourage children to explain; read to children in groups and individually; use music, chants, rhythms, and finger plays; and listen to children while encouraging them to communicate verbally. Caregivers are reminded that children need communicative adults in order to develop rich and complex communication skills. (RH)

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Talk, Read, Joke, Make Friends: Language Power for Children

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Stimulating Language Development

The lusty birth cry with which most babies enter the world is the first in a long series of vocal behaviors which ever increase in communicative effectiveness as a child grows through infancy into the preschool years. By the time a child enters elementary grades he or she can understand and use thousands of words (Honig, 1982b). Pronunciation is almost entirely comprehensible. The child uses the main grammatical rules very well such as adding "ing" for he progressive tense, or "ed" for the past tense, or using negation correctly as in "I don't like liver" (De Villiers and De Villiers, 1979; Elliot, 1981). Children can understand double meanings for words by four years of age. A child might explain to you that "A turn is when your car turns around a corner and it also is when you take turns on the playground". Linguistic humor becomes possible as the child becomes able to play with and make a play on words. (Honig, 1988)

Our language understandings and language skills are a precious and almost unique heritage, despite the impressive achievements of apes who have learned some sign language. Children need a caring, communicative adult from whom and with whom they can learn language. Toys alone or playmates cannot enhance language development. Caregivers are crucial. Language is a powerful tool. Fluent command of the nuances and complexities of language give humans the ability to change their own and other's lives and to mobilize others for good or for evil in gangs, classrooms, political rallies, and intimate family situations.

One has only to remember the eloquence of Winston Churchill, the noble words of Martin Luther King , and the hypnotizing speeches of Adolf Hitler who motivated masses of people to commit and sanction atrocities, in order to realize the full might of language power.

Different aspects of language development are important to grasp before we can give "prescriptions" for classrooms or share educational tips for improving the language skills of young children. We need to understand the functions of language and the development of competence - both in receptive and expressive language. We need to be aware of the ways in which oral and written language are related. Stories in books are written - down; they are stories people can tell. The language problems of some children may lie in not comprehending, while others, particularly children brought up in another language at home, may understand but be shy and have difficulties in using language expressively and communicatively or in learning to read.

Effective teachers use the strengths of children, such as their oral fluency, or their attentive listening skills to help them develop richer language fluency and skills such as story telling, answering questions about a story or learning to read for meaning (Gleason, 1988; Pflaum, 1986; Reilly, 1980; Van Allen & Allen, 1982).

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Functions of language

It is an exciting experience to ask a group of caregivers or of teachers what they use language for. Early on, as they build their taxonomy of language functions, the first ideas offered are often that we use language to communicate needs and feelings and wishes- pleasure, sadness, praise, wonder, appreciation, suspicion, jealousy, frustration, anger, resentment, friendly empathic concern, love, fear, curiosity and a host of other emotions. We also communicate cognitively. We give and ask for information, we explain, compare, reason logically (or illogically!), ask for help, illustrate with examples and categorize. As caregivers, we need to help children learn to use language for a wide variety of needs and in a variety of different situations. If language is a tool, it is also a marvelous toy. With language, children can role play, dramatize, wax poetic, indulge in doggerel and puns, flirt, tease, talk to imaginary playmates, play games with rules, chant, sing, and create silly sounding rhymes.

Many of the functions of language mix and match or mismatch with each other. With language, a child learns sometimes to lie, to please adults by an answer, whether or not he understands the answer or agrees with it. Think of the reception a child receives for the following: "Teacher, I was late because I wanted to just walk slowly all the way to school and watch everything like grass, and birds, and worms, and people" compared to the teacher's response if the child had lied and said "Teacher, sorry I am late but my grandma is sick and I had to help my mom." Are we sensitive enough to the fact that language can be used to cover feelings, to hide thoughts? Caregivers need to encourage children to use language as a rich communicative tool. Unconditional acceptance of the goodness of children helps them to open up and use talking in richer and more honest ways. Following are some tips for teachers that can help young children find the pleasures and powers of language in their everyday world.

Twenty Tips for Caregivers

1. TIE WORDS TO ACTIONS

   a - Self talk - describe your own actions as you do them. This gives you the opportunity to introduce new words. "I am relaxing my shoulder." "I am mixing color into the play dough."

   b - Parallel talk - describe the children's actions as they do them. "You're squeezing the dough so hard." "You're lining up the blocks so carefully."

2. HELP CHILDREN COMMUNICATE WITHOUT ORAL LANGUAGE

   a - Use pantomime games - act out stories or situations without words. Act out meanings of words.

   b - Use charade games - "Pretend you're carrying the biggest log you ever saw." "Pretend you're pouring a glass of milk."

4. MEET THE MATCH DEVELOPMENTALLY

With youngest children use simple words and phrases for things and actions and increase complexity as child's language grows. Know where the child is developmentally and move forward as he does - stretch and expand language but don't overwhelm children (Honig, 1985). "Wa wa" is fine for "water" and is easy for a year old baby, but remember to use more complex speech as the baby's language skills grow. Example: Child, "Dat Doggy" Adult "Yes that's a friendly furry doggy."

a - Be very specific in making requests. "Put these tall red blocks with the other tall red blocks."

b - Look directly at the child when you are talking to him; watch his eyes and you will know if he is following you or is confused.

c - Be aware of noise level in the room. A high level of noise is detrimental to language development.

d - Articulate words clearly. Let's read the "Cat in the Hat" 'Thank you." 'Does the dolly's hat go on her hand or on her head?"

5. USE SPECIFIC ENCOURAGEMENT

Praise specific activities or actions of the child that you like. "I like your drawing: your lines just seem to flow like dancing." "I like the way you built the block tower so tall."

6. HELP CHILDREN THINK IN SEQUENCES

Children need to learn that we often do things in a certain order - "First we put the flour and sugar in the bowl; then we pour in the milk." Timing and sequence are important parts of life. "What happens if we put our shoes on before our socks?" Give children things to do in order: "Joan, please pick up the yellow pencil, put it on my desk, jump up and down three times, then close the door." "We have our nap after we brush our teeth and go potty."

Sequencing is important in language and in reading skills.

7. TEACH TIME AND SPACE WORDS. TEACH POLAR OPPOSITES AND RELATIONAL TERMS

Use objects found in the child care center (blocks, cars, etc.) to talk about spatial relationships - in front of, behind, over, under, front, back, etc. Use objects to talk about comparison - which is biggest, fattest, tallest, etc. Which comes first, second, last?

Stimulate comparisons, judgments, evaluations. The mother is taller than the baby. The pencil is skinnier than the baseball bat. Use materials when necessary to show the children: for example, a wet washcloth; and a dry washcloth; a soft sponge and a hard stone. Teach polar opposites to very young children through body actions. Have them throw a ball near and then far. Have them take a big giant step and then a tiny step. Have them draw a long crayon line and then a short line.

USE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

"What would happen if...?" "Tell me about this?" "What would you see if you were a bird flying over the school?" "What do we need to bake a cake?" "What could you do to comfort a baby who is crying?"

Open-ended questions stimulate the flow of children's language help them remember events and think logically. (Blank, 1973).

ACTIVATE CHILDREN'S LISTENING SKILLS

Play games where you make "mistakes" for the children to catch you on. "Simple Simon met a pieman going home to bed!" Children love silly things and being alert for your mistakes makes them listen carefully. "After we clean the clothes do we hang up our watch or our wash?" Give different instructions than usual and see if the children catch the difference. Say strings of words with the same initial consonant or medial vowel. Have one word different. Can the children hear the different word? Example: "Pig, Pill, Big, Pick" (Honig, 1982a).

KEEP TALK AND ATTITUDES TOWARD LANGUAGE POSITIVE - USE HUMOR

Use interesting and interested and affectionate voice tones with children. Use praise - but keep it specific. Keep verbal promises. This helps children learn that adult language can be depended upon.

Listen carefully to your child's talk and look at him or her with interest when you answer. Give them the message that talking with them is a pleasure and meaningful for you.

Use Humor - For example, ask children "Can a tree bark or go woof-woof? No! Dogs bark! Trees have bark on their outside!! Use "jokes" and words with two meanings. Humor lightens the day and helps young children enjoy the playful pleasure of language used humorously.

With young preschoolers, accept language deformations in pronunciation or grammar, but do provide a model for correct usage. With older preschoolers, if severe delays in articulation exist, play games to practice difficult sounds. For example, if medial L & R are absent in a 5-year-old, try: GLOW, GROW, BLOW, SLOW, THROW, CROW, and FLOW with pictures that illustrate each word.

DESCRIBE AND LABEL: ENCOURAGE "DISTANCING" SKILLS

Have the children describe and label objects, pictures, colors, shapes and sizes. Have them taste honey, then put lemon on the honey and have children describe the difference. Pour water into paint powder and have them describe what they see. Let children touch, feel, smell, and then describe different objects. Use food experiences, preparation and mealtime for stimulating language.

Use descriptions to help children "distance" themselves from real events or concrete objects. Refer to past and future activities. Discuss trips taken or anticipated. Talk about events and feelings. Dr. Sigel's (1979) research shows that preschool children who can distance this way can carry out classifications using pictorial representational material and words as symbols, as well as classifying concrete three dimensional objects and toys.

. HELP CHILDREN BEGIN TO SEE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WRITTEN AND ORAL LANGUAGE

Help children sign their work - with their own name if able or one letter, such as "S" for Sam. Children need to begin to see the relationship between squiggles on paper and spoken words. Write down children's stories. Hang each child's story with a clothespin on the branches or twigs of a small, fallen tree limb that you set in a bucket of sand.

2. MAKING UP STORIES

a - Help children make up and tell stories about pictures, about things and events. For example, have a bag with all kinds of keys and let each child choose one key and tell a story about it. Show a picture of a baby and have children tell how they grew from being a baby to now.

b - Have children retell stories to other children. This is fun, stretches listening and memory skills, and it is amazing how that story can change as it is retold!

c - Have children tell stories about how things are done in their family at home. "Tell us how your mama fixes hot dogs." Tell stories about how you lived as a child. Tell stories about your grandparents' lives.

3. ENGAGE IN DRAMATIC PLAY GAMES

Act out "The Three Bears".
Pretend to have a tea party or bake a cake.
Pretend to get ready to go swimming.
Pretend a tricycle is a car and your preschooler is stopping to buy gas from you.
Pretend to go out gathering wild berries or mushrooms and talk about how to search for and carry what you picked.
Pretend to be climbing a steep hill that may have a bear at the top and talk out your feelings.
If you are reading a story to children that has good action to dramatize, then have toddlers or preschoolers pretend to swim like the fishes, or stuff themselves with popcorn, or creep around an imaginary tree - if, for example, these actions are in the story.

. DISCUSS FEELINGS WITH CHILDREN

"What happens when you are scared?" "What makes you feel worried (angry, puzzled, glad, etc.)?" If you are feeling angry, what can you do? What might happen then?

5. HELP CHILDREN REASON AND USE CAUSE AND EFFECT WORDS

Encourage children to express themselves in if-then phrases and have them tell you why they do things in a certain way. Have them talk about why this happens when we do that. "How did the little bear know that someone had been sitting in his chair?" Child: "Because it was all broke down - something big musta sat in it." Good thinking!

Model If-Then reasoning: "If we whip the cream too long, then it will turn to butter." "If we leave a book out in the rain, then the pages will get all wet and messy." "If we want to paint at the easel, then we need to put on a smock so that our clothes can stay clean."
Play a "what if" game: "What if we didn't have enough crackers for all the children?" "What if we didn't erase the blackboard after drawing on it?"

16. HELP CHILDREN LEARN POSITIVE SOCIAL SKILLS

Teach magic politeness words like "please" and "thank you." Use these words yourself. Help children to think about the feelings that they feel when someone is rude or kind to them.

17. USE INCONGRUITY - MAKE OBVIOUS MISTAKES

Occasionally make "silly" mistakes that are obvious. Ask, "Is this my (point to knee) nose?" "Do I have two mouths?" Kids love silly notions. Put a purple hat on a yellow monkey while doing a felt board retelling of "Caps for Sale." Act bewildered if the preschoolers protest. They will need to find phrases to explain your "mistake" to you.

Make a book of incongruous pictures. Have a child tell you why the picture is "funny" or "foolish". Examples:

* a banana with a zipper on the skin.
* a dancer with 6 pairs of stockings and legs.
* a person holding a glass of juice upside down (and the juice seems to stay neatly in place)
* a dog practicing the piano
* a child with socks on hands

18. READ TO THE CHILDREN - IN GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALLY

Read to children every day. Be sure that books and cushions to lean on are readily available in a peaceful corner. Have children make up stories that you write down and read back to them. For infants, make up stories to pictures. For example: pictures of a ball, a shoe, a baby, a dog, a grandmother, a banana, and juice can make a fine 7 page book.

If reading is hard for you, then turn the pages of a picture book and point out the objects and people and animals and make up stories about the pictures - for example, someone riding a horse or slowing down a train if the tracks are blocked, or searching for bullfrogs in an old pond, or having a picnic with a friend.

Use oilcloth and cardboard and cloth books for babies. Express your pleasure with books. Change your voice tones as you read to hold a child's interest. Sometimes pause dramatically. Read the same story over and over until your children feel very comfortable and knowledgeable about each story book. Change the text to help increase their interest, to rouse their curiosity, to keep them attuned to the flow of the tale.

19. USE MUSIC, CHANTS, RHYTHMS, AND FINGER PLAYS

Sing with children. Sing to children. Memorize songs. Make up songs - sing some songs over and over.
Rhyme words. Examples: I can wiggle my nose, I can wiggle my _____ (toes)

A little black bug creeps under the _____(rug).

In a little gray house lives a little gray ____ (mouse).

Read rhyming poems to the children and emphasize the same sounds.

Beat out rhythms on a drum or upturned waste basket. Encourage children to move their bodies or their hands or their instruments to different rhythms.

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0. LISTEN TO CHILDREN. ENCOURAGE THEM TO COMMUNICATE VERBALLY.

Keep kids thinking and talking - to you and to each other. Give their ideas, feelings and suggestions your attention. Make them feel that their language communications are important.

Use door openers - such as "Could you tell me about that?" Use you-messages to help children "open up" verbally. For example "It sounds like you really had a wonderful time." or "You are really feeling upset about what happened with Johnny." Then, listen actively and attentively to the children's responses. Try to reflect their feelings so they sense that you have communicated with each other and understand each

Conclusion

Remember, language learning is a priceless power that adults can give as a gift to young children. The responsive caregiver is an essential partner in helping children become fine language decoders and creative language users. Children need peers and toys for learning to play well and get along sociably. For rich and complex communication skills, they need tuned-in communicative adult caregivers. Help your children become powerful language learners.

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